



Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie
National Forest

Forest FEATURES



Community and Youth Grow with Nature

Most 10-year-olds don't know what they want to be when they grow up. But Jonathan Suarez does. "I want to be a Forest Service Ranger like Orlando," he said.

Trying on Orlando's Stetson was Jonathan's first impression of being a forest ranger. Becoming a ranger takes years of school and a passion for nature. Developing that passion is what the Kulshan Creek Kids Neighborhood program is all about. "We want this to be a life-changing experience while interacting with nature," said Orlando Garcia. "I got to know these kids during a re-vegetation activity at one of our campgrounds. The Forest Service needed me to translate into Spanish," he said.

Orlando Garcia is one of the Forest Service employees who participate with the Kulshan Creek Kids Neighborhood Kids program. It was tough growing up there, said Orlando. "There were gangs, drugs and crime. Delivery drivers would not come into the neighborhood for fear of getting mugged," he said.

In the 1990s, 911 calls flooded the Mount Vernon Police Department from the

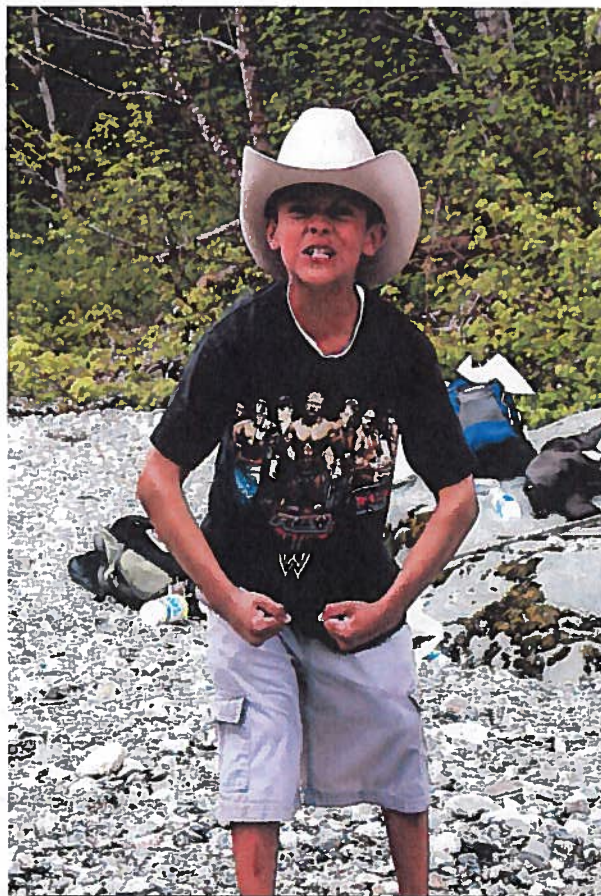
Kulshan Creek area for dangerous crimes, homicides, assaults and gang-related activity, according to Jon Gerondale, Kulshan Creek neighborhood resource officer. "Something

had to be done, people were afraid to take action and just accepted the criminal behavior," he said. "Many of these kids are at a high risk to engage in gang-related activities or juvenile crimes."

Taking back the neighborhood began in 1998 with the creation of a substation in the community. "Heavy enforcement was needed to establish normal acceptable behavior for the community to grow," Gerondale said. A crime awareness campaign was initiated to keep the community informed. Gerondale

started the Kulshan Creek Kids Neighborhood Kids program in the summer of 2007. "Our goal is to get kids outdoors and learning about environmental stewardship. Most of the kids have never visited a national forest or park," he said.

Exploring the great outdoors requires help from multiple supporters. The Forest Service along with the North Cascades National Park



Trying on Orlando's hat gives Jonathan Suarez a small insight into being a Forest Ranger.



Photo by US Forest Service

A mountain goat stands on top of the mountain.

teach the kids about wildlife and orienteer by watching mountain goats on Mt. Baker or viewing eagles in flight over the Skagit River. Camping at the North Cascades Institute's learning center, kids canoe across Diablo Lake, discover bird watching and practice their owl calls. The kids find out about ocean ecosystems on their trips to Deception Pass and Padilla Bay.

"One of the biggest things we offer is playing together, said Lee Whitford, outreach naturalist with the North Cascades Institute. "These kids don't get that opportunity to play out in nature," she said.

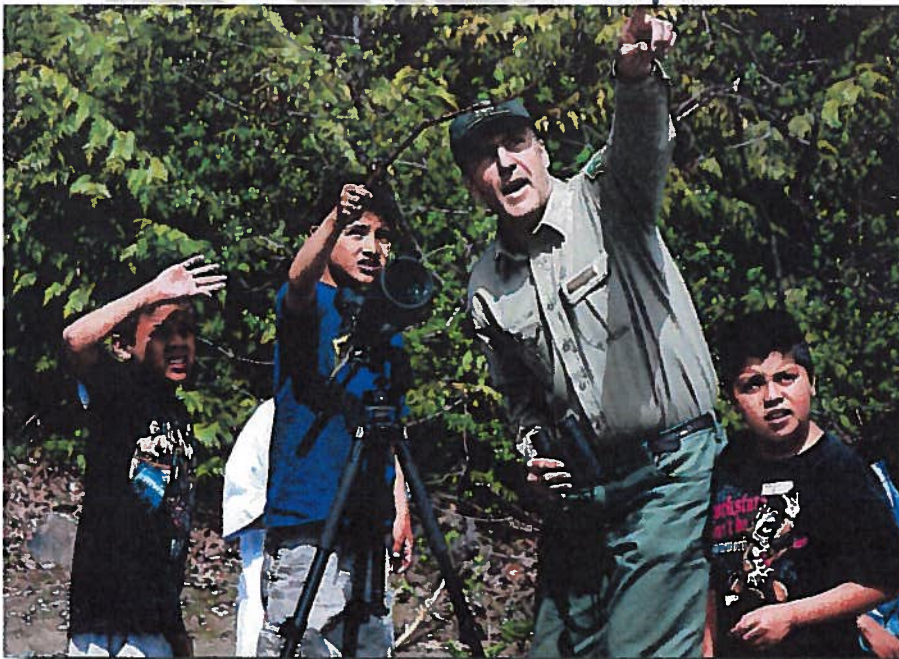
Jonathan and Orlando have a lot more in common than their career goals. Both are students who enjoy learning. Orlando is working on his associate degree from the Skagit Community College. On completion of his degree, the Forest Service will place him in the Student Career Educational Employment Program, which puts him on the path to become a ranger.

Jonathan likes school and the Kulshan Creek kids. "They teach me stuff about animals and nature," he said. "I take responsibility for my own stuff and what I need to do," said Jonathan. He has been with the Kulshan Creek kids from the beginning and has seen the improvements in the neighborhood. "It's more fun to play outside," he said.

Orlando said he always sees smiles when he works with the kids. "They're having a good time and want to come back for more. I don't know how I've helped them, but if they open up to me, it is all worth it," he said.

The program has been running for two years and with each outing it grows. The word gets out about the trips, Gerondale said. "It is remarkable the level of trust we have earned. Twenty parents agreed to let their kids go camping at the environmental learning center for three days," he said.

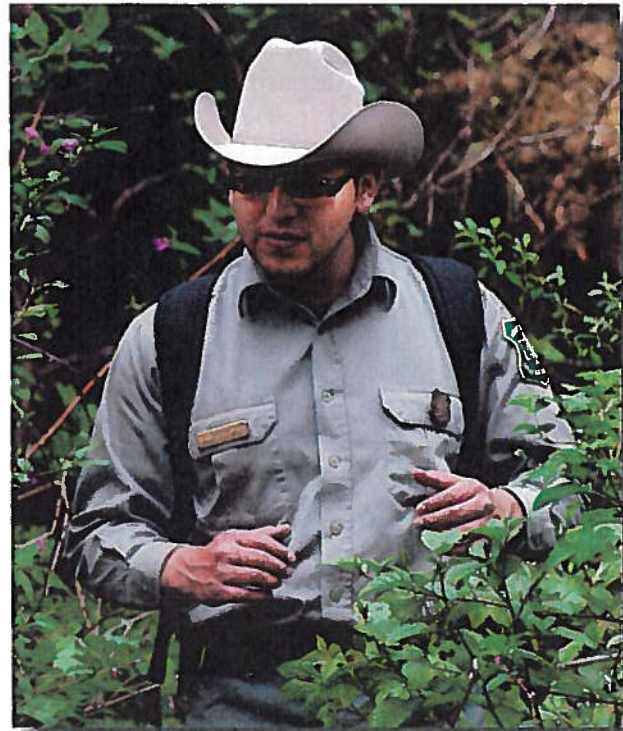
The Kulshan Kids also help around their community. "We have cleaned up our street



Don Gay, US Forest Service biologist, points out the mountain goats to Kulshan Kids Jonathan Suarez, Jose Esquivel, and Amiel Dominguez

and scrubbed graffiti off the walls," said Jonathan. Gerondale said the kids take it personally when trash or graffiti shows up again. "These kids are the ones letting me know. They realize that trash and abandoned cars can lead to crime. They take pride in their work and are creating a greater sense of community," he said.

The Kulshan Creek neighborhood is safer now. "We have established a quality of life not present before the neighborhood station. We have witnessed a 30 percent decrease in 911 calls for services from the neighborhood where the rest of Mount Vernon has dropped by only one percent," Gerondale said.



Orlando Garcia leads the Kulshan Kids to Baker River for lunch.

The Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Kids program conducts weekly activities and schedules monthly nature outings. The next event is a trail hike to Artist Point in August on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. Program information can be found at the neighborhood station website at <http://www.geocities.com/kulshancreek/> or contact Officer Gerondale at 360-336-0630 ext. 1456.

Information about program sponsors can be found at their websites below:

US Forest Service MBS National Forest:
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/mbs/>
North Cascades Institute:
<http://www.ncascades.org/>
North Cascades National Park:
<http://www.nps.gov/noca/index.htm>

*Story and photos by Kelly Sprute
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